4 February 2018: Choral Matins

Sexagesima (The Second Sunday before Lent)

Psalm 53, Deuteronomy 8: 1–10, Matthew 6: 25–34

The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean

‘The foolish body hath said in his heart: There is no God’. So opens the forty-third psalm and its near parallel, Psalm 14. To our ears that verse sounds like a clear assertion of atheism – atheism condemned as folly, of course – but atheism all the same. In fact it’s a nice question whether the Bible entertains the possibility of atheism at all.

Rather in the way that the same-sex practices condemned in rare biblical passages may well not bear much resemblance to modern homosexuality, so the few scriptural allusions to denial of God are talking about something very different from the considered principles of modern atheism.

It is misleading simply to equate the practices condemned by the authors of Genesis and Leviticus, and later by the apostle Paul, with modern understandings of homosexuality. The ‘sin of Sodom’ in Genesis 19 is not homosexuality, but inhospitality; the abomination of a man lying with a man in Leviticus 18 and 20 is abominable because it implies adoption of the impure practices of the surrounding Gentile nations, among which are numbered also the shaving of one’s beard and the consumption of shellfish; and even the strictures of Saint Paul are directed primarily against idolatry. The sexual practices that Paul condemns as unnatural in the first chapter of Romans are such because they are regarded as the wilful adoption of aberrant behaviour by people whose natural state is heterosexual. None of these verses can straightforwardly be taken as condemning homosexuality as we now generally understand it: an orientation on a spectrum of sexuality that is both naturally given and culturally shaped.

And if the Bible does not contain within its pages anything very close to a modern understanding of homosexuality, neither does it of atheism. Atheism in its current sense of the consistent theoretical denial of the possibility of God is, by and large, a modern invention, inconceivable within the world view of the scriptures. ‘The foolish body
hath said in his heart: There is no God’: this is not a more sonorous way of expressing the sentiment that ‘atheists are fools’. The foolish body condemned here is the body of every human being – all of us, Jew or Gentile – whose lives are separated from one another and God by the mysterious magnetism of selfishness and sin. The fool is everywhere: that hard and ruthless disposition that leads us to behave as if we are our own self-sufficient gods (Eaton). The kind of slash and burn, scorched earth, anti-communitarian spirit that is presently being realised in intense form in some of the most prominent arenas of global politics.

We need to bear this in mind when we read Jesus’s words in Matthew 5:22: ‘But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgement; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool”, you will be liable to the hell of fire.’ Perplexing as this is to us at first hearing, in the idiom of the time, for a Jew to call a person a fool was far more derogatory than to call him stupid or mad. As Alan Richardson puts it:

Jesus’s meaning would seem to be: The Rabbis say that if you say Raca (an expression of contempt) to a person, you are liable to punishment by the sanhedrin: but I say that, even if you so much as call a man a fool, you will be in danger of divine judgement and punishment. It is a serious matter to be a fool in the biblical sense, and the word virtually means ‘apostate’ or ‘damned’.

When the psalmist talks of the foolish body who says in his heart ‘there is no God’, we should think less of Richard Dawkins and his tribe, and more of ourselves and all our fellows in the faith, who so often live as practical atheists, denying God in our lives as we profess him with our lips.

Well perhaps I’m being a little harsh on us here, but at the very least we must admit that the question of atheism and its relation to religious faith is much a more complex one than we often take it to be. For a start it doesn’t turn on the opposition of the religious, spiritual mindset with the secular, materialist one. It is perfectly possible, for instance, to be an orthodox Hindu or an orthodox Buddhist and an atheist – indeed in some forms of Buddhism and in all forms of Jainism it is unorthodox not to be an atheist. And then there is the famous statement of the early Christian apologist, Justin Martyr. Accused of atheism by the faithful practitioners of pagan polytheism, Justin said of Christian believers: ‘We confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned’, although he of course immediately adds, ‘but not with regard to the most true God’
(Apology, 1:5-6). Much Christian engagement with modern atheism proceeds from the assumption that battle lines are clearly drawn. Over there are the battalions of secularist materialists: those who know there is no God, whose focus is entirely immanent and this-worldly and have no time for religion; over here are those who acknowledge the place of spirituality, religion and a relationship to transcendental truth beyond us. In fact the picture is a much more varied one, as the multi-cultural diversity of modern urban Britain very readily shows us.

The Psalmist’s statement is not thumbing its nose at some Iron Age antecedent of Daniel Dennett or early Semitic Sam Harris. Instead the words are aimed at us. ‘The foolish body hath said in his heart: There is no God’: this is us, carrying on as if we have the answers, worshiping our little gods, disregarding the image of God in ourselves and others, lumbering recklessly around the world we are called to steward, ignoring the cry of the poor and the call to justice. In contrast, says the Psalmist, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom’: fear, not as cringing terror, but as the awe-struck acknowledgement of our insufficiency, the humility to inhabit our finitude before God.

The comedian Dave Allen used to end his programmes with the blessing, ‘And may your God go with you’, as if you could have god you choose. As Denys Turner says, this is the postmodern heresy: the blessing is worthless, for ‘your’ God, being but yours, is bound to go with you, is bound to you by your choosing, because invented by your choosing, a petty little godlet of your own fabrication’ (Turner, Faith Seeking, p.34)

But the truth to which the scriptures point us and which Christ reveals to us is that God goes with us, even as he lies infinitely, inconceivably beyond us. In Christ Creator and creation are bound together in love, not because they are one and the same; precisely because they are not one and the same, the divine love, mercy and compassion that links them is freely offered, for us freely to accept – and the horror is that I, you, we, so regularly disregard it, saying with our lives that there is no God, whatever we may think we are doing with our minds.

‘We are all gone out of the way, we are altogether become abominable: there is also none that doeth good, no not one’. And yet ‘behold the Man’: in Christ ‘salvation has been given unto [the world] out of Sion’, ‘the Lord has delivered his people’; God has called us back that ‘we may be God’s people and God be our God’.
A prayer of Edmund of Abingdon:

Lord, since you exist, we exist.
Since you are beautiful, we are beautiful.
Since you are good, we are good.
By our existence we honour you.
By our beauty we glorify you.
By our goodness we love you.
Lord, through your power all things were made.
Through your wisdom all things are governed.
Through your grace all things are sustained.
Give us power to serve you,

wisdom to discern your laws,

and grace to obey them at all times. Amen.